

**A sense of wonder: Student engagement in low SES school communities**

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This paper reports on research into student engagement undertaken in the Fair Go Project. It discusses a theoretical and pedagogical framework developed in the project that directs teachers' attention to significant changes they can make within their classrooms in order to encourage both short and long term student engagement with education.

### **A Sense of Wonder**

Didn't I come to bring you a sense of wonder ...

There are classrooms in poor communities where there is little sense of wonder. Surprises are few. There is not much to marvel at. The miracle might never come.

The challenge remains to find ways that educationally disadvantaged students might be encouraged to embrace classrooms and a school system that has worked against the majority of their people over long periods of time. Low SES students still bear the greatest brunt of the educational losses from schools and classrooms that offer hope and achievement for all, but deliver loss, devaluation and exclusion for many.

This paper tells the story of the Fair Go Project, research into student engagement in Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP<sup>1</sup>) contexts. It is a story of schools in South-Western Sydney where together teachers and students set about changing the nature of their classroom experiences. The hope was for classrooms to become places that offered students a sense of belonging and achieving, delivering powerful messages that school was a place for them, and education was a resource that they could profitably deploy in their present and future lives.

### **Student Engagement and The Fair Go Project**

The Fair Go Project (FGP) is a joint undertaking between a team of researchers from the University of Western Sydney (School of Education and Early Childhood Studies) and the Priority Schools Funding Program (NSW Department of Education and Training). An action research project employing a co-researching ethnographic methodology, the study brings together university researchers, educational consultants, school-teachers and community members. The project's theoretical underpinnings derive from important research into 'authentic' (Newmann & Associates, 1996) and 'productive' pedagogy (School Reform Longitudinal Study: Hayes, Lingard and Mills, 2000).

Within this research debate about the relationship between teachers' pedagogies and student educational outcomes, the FGP adopts a particular focus on student engagement. This is because, unlike the studies into pedagogy mentioned above, the FGP is specifically concerned with students from low SES backgrounds. The project is well aware that in schools serving poor communities there are enduring tensions between student resistance and teachers' classroom practices (McFadden & Munns, 2002). Studies have continually shown that even when (and often, especially when<sup>2</sup>) teachers' pedagogies are well-intended and theoretically sound there is no guarantee that low SES students will accept and comply with them. Therefore the FGP takes up the position that student engagement is a key centralising factor in the successful implementation of classroom pedagogies and the follow-on to improved student outcomes. This position dictates a research concentration on pedagogy as a process rather than teachers' planned practices to be adopted by students. It is the "playing out" that is going to make pedagogies authentic or productive rather than just the teachers' intentions.

### **Levels of Engagement and the Fair Go Project**

There is a further critical aspect of student engagement that intensely concerns the FGP. To generalise across students from low SES backgrounds, they have historically not had the same emotional attachment and commitment to education as students from more privileged backgrounds.

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<sup>1</sup> The Priority Schools Funding Program (formerly Disadvantaged Schools Program [DSP]) is a program aimed at improving educational outcomes for students living in the poorest communities in NSW.

<sup>2</sup> See Jones (1989) and Haberman (1991) for discussions of how low SES and minority background students reject classroom practices consciously designed to improve their educational outcomes.

They have rejected education<sup>3</sup> as a long-term resource to be deployed in their lives in greater numbers than others. In short, as a group, they have not gone the same educational distances physically (retention to higher levels), academically (results leading to further studies and/or opportunity) or emotionally (seeing schools as places that work for them). The FGP seriously takes this issue on board and consequently sees the importance of thinking about two levels of engagement.

At the first level is a substantive engagement with the learning experiences at hand. This is called *small 'e' engagement* (“in-task”) and is distinct from being procedurally engaged or “on-task” and merely complying with teachers’ wishes and instructions. Defining ‘e’ngagement has been an important aspect of the theoretical work of the FGP. The first part of this process was problematising student compliance. It was a risky step given that classroom management issues inevitably dominated the thoughts and practices of the teachers the project was working with. However, student compliance was seen to be a pedagogical outcome that held no guarantees for enhanced academic and social outcomes. Furthermore, there was compelling research evidence showing that low SES students shaped classroom practices by resisting high level tasks and complying with low level tasks (see Jones, 1989, Haberman, 1991, Munns, 1996 and Munns [in press]). So there was the taking up of a theoretical and empirical commitment to understanding and developing a deeper student relationship with classroom work. Engagement was then defined by the FGP as operating at cognitive (thinking), affective (feeling) and operative (doing) levels. It follows from this that when students are strongly engaged they are successfully involved in tasks of high intellectual quality and they have passionate positive feelings about these tasks. Put another way, engagement is when the cognitive, the affective and the operative are occurring at high levels. This view was both influenced by, and contextually reshaped the research literature. Most definitions of student engagement describe its multifaceted nature, typically thought of as cognitive, emotional or behavioural (Fredricks *et al.* 2004). The cognitive and emotional aspects of engagement were accepted by the FGP, though “affective” was considered to offer a clearer pedagogical focus for teachers (see below when engaging practices are discussed). Changing behavioural to “operative” recognised not only the rejection of compliance discussed above, but also a central research argument that for low SES students to be beneficially engaged, they need to be highly operational learners. Operative again provided a stronger pedagogical and outcome focus for both teachers and students.

The second level of student engagement is that longer and more enduring relationship with schooling and education that is rejected in large numbers by students living in poor communities. This is called *big 'E' engagement*, an emotional attachment to and a commitment to education: the belief that “school is for me” (McFadden & Munns, 2002).

### **“The Future in the Present”: The Relationship Between Classroom Engagement and Long Term Engagement With Schooling and Education**

The Fair Go Project believes that these levels of engagement are dialectically linked. Its position is that small ‘e’ngagement is embedded within big ‘E’ngagement and this provides an important opportunity for classrooms to become critical sites where the immediate educational experiences build to a future-oriented consciousness that sees education as a resource to be profitably employed within students’ lives. Viewed in this way, the argument is that there is a temporal relationship between these levels of engagement. It is useful to conceptualise this embedding of the two levels of engagement as “the future in the present”. There is an intriguing theoretical twist here to the seminal work on resistance theory by Willis (1977, 1981, 1983). Willis argued that when working-class students freely choose to reject what schooling purports to offer them (academic success in return for acceptance of and compliance with curriculum and pedagogy), they open themselves up to the very real possibility of future exploitation and oppression. They make “a free choice to be unfree” (Munns & McFadden, 2000, p.61): their present freely chosen resistant stances and actions determine their future unequal structural position. As Willis (1977, p.120) put it, “It is the future in the present which hammers freedom into inequality”. A tantalizing research prospect emerges here. How can there be an empirical consideration of the ways that the very kinds of low SES students that Willis described could be encouraged, by the nature of their classroom experiences and relationships, not to see school and

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<sup>3</sup> They have also been rejected by schools and teachers through punitive disciplinary policies, suspensions and assessment/testing regimes. The educational system is also implicated here through unequal resource policies and the maintenance of a hegemonic curriculum (Connell, 1993).

education as a debilitating set of encounters to be ultimately resisted, but rather as a cumulative series of engaging phenomena? How can the future in the present not restrict, but bring into being enhanced future educational possibilities and, as a consequence, challenge the probability of inherited structural locations?

### **Links Between Classrooms and Discourses of Power**

It is such a research prospect that has become the FGP's main empirical hub. Theoretical and empirical investigations have opened up opportunities for the project to explore the links between classroom discourses and the wider dimensions of social power. At a classroom level there is an important theoretical frame that speaks to these links and this has become critical to the pedagogical changes in the action phase of the project. Engagement is a consciousness and an educational identity significantly influenced by teachers' three message systems: curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices (Bernstein, 1996). Since both 'e'ngagement and 'E'ngagement are internal feelings, it is the students' internal processes that are crucial. This is the case even though the catalysts for engagement may be substantially through external classroom practices and discourses (learning experiences and discussion and reflection on those learning experiences).

The connections between classroom practices and discourses with wider societal structures turn on the temporal concept of the future in the present: the small 'e' engagement embedded in the big 'E' engagement. While students are processing and taking up positions within the powerful school and classroom message systems (curriculum, pedagogy and assessment) they are also negotiating with their teachers "discourses of power": knowledge, ability, control, place and voice. Issues such as –

- what counts as knowledge and who has access to really useful knowledge?
- who has ability?
- who controls the teaching space?
- who is valued as an individual and a learner?
- whose voice is given credence within that space?

- all influence the way teachers teach and how students see themselves as learners. Again, to generalize across the group, the common and recurring result of these negotiations for low SES students is that they are receiving disengaging messages. These messages are summarized in Table 1.

*Table 1 – Discourses of Power and Disengaging Messages for Low SES Students*

knowledge	"Why are we doing this?" – restricted access to powerful knowledge
ability	"I can't do this" – feelings of not being able to achieve and a spiral of low expectations and aspirations
control	"I'm not doing that" – struggles over classroom time and space and debilitating consequences of resistance and compliance
place	"I'm just a kid from" – devalued as individual and learner
voice	"Teacher tells us" – no say over learning with teacher as sole controller and judge

### **Discourses of Power: Knowledge, Ability, Control, Place and Voice**

The discourses of power that frame the classroom messages are reached in two ways. The first is through an extensive review of literature and the second is inductively from the FGP research. When the research began, the focus was on exploring a primary theoretical framework of what "authentic instruction" (Newmann and Associates, 1996) or "productive pedagogies" (Hayes, Lingard and Mills, 2000) might look like in low SES classrooms in Sydney's South West. In order to follow this research intention a secondary theoretical framework was developed by the research team. The framework was grounded in school, syllabus and classroom issues related to the primary framework and allowed the research to have multiple investigative perspectives within the overarching themes of improved classroom pedagogies and student engagement. Links between the two theoretical frameworks were strengthened through a concentration of issues relating to social justice and student equality. The multiple perspectives broadly fell into three intersecting and complementary themes: classroom

discourses, syllabus and literacies and technologies. Each of these is now briefly summarised with coding suggesting links to the hypothesised discourses of power<sup>4</sup>.

Classroom discourses took up ideas around social constructivism and diverse constructivism [K] (Au, 1998, Cummins, 1996) within a sociolinguistics paradigm (Halliday, 1985). From an increased understanding of the diverse and multiple literacies that children from the research contexts were bringing to school (Luke, 2000), there were salient research opportunities opened up to ratify and build on existing literacy competencies (Heath, 1983). In this way relationships between schools and communities became foregrounded in literacy practices [P V]. Other important aspects of classroom discourses were considered, most notably the extent to which the school ethos sustained the needs of the whole school community [P]. Success at school was considered beyond the narrow bounds of teacher control and abstract testing to ideas of authentic achievement (Newmann, 1996) and authentic assessment (Cumming & Maxwell, 1999) where student self-direction and meaningful reflection were thought to provide avenues for the design of more productive educational futures [A C V].

Syllabus and pedagogy connected with the first theme through theoretical arguments around pedagogical issues of social constructivism and the active involvement of students in their own learning [K C V] (NSW Board of Studies, 1998; Brophy and Alleman, 1996). Integrated learning across all KLA and subject boundaries was a key idea in this theme. The research focus was on learning experiences in which students explore authentic issues, 'big ideas' and consider multiple realities [K]. Foregrounded here were child views of learning [C V] (Bruner, 1960) positioned with emerging ideas of powerful and empowering teaching and learning (National Council for the Social Studies, 1993). Contextualisation of learning was seen to be significant for student engagement leading to knowledge, skills and values through and beyond future schooling [A P].

Within the literacies and technologies theme the research focus was on cultural and linguistic diversity operating through multiple language channels and media (New London Group, 2000) [K P]. Critical literacy frameworks (Freire, 1973; Freebody and LoBianco, 1997; Gee, 1990; Luke, 2000) provided a theoretical basis for considering ways that students could be actively involved in literacy experiences that were able to give them opportunities to understand and use a variety of texts important for their current and future education [C V]. Transformative social practices within classrooms were then seen to operate as enabling sociocultural and political constructions (Peters & Lankshear, 1996) [A C]. Here the role of technology was to support and enhance literacy and learning for changing educational, personal and working futures (Durrant & Green, 2000) [K A].

At the same time as the connecting themes within the primary and secondary theoretical frameworks were directing classroom research, emerging data across the whole FGP project began to suggest and then confirm that there were differences in classrooms across the multiple research sites. Students were showing signs that they were becoming more 'e'ngaged. Bringing together the theoretical underpinnings with the student data, the FGP hypothesised that these signs of 'e'ngagement were influenced by the messages delivered through the changed classroom pedagogies. If, as it was previously argued, students from low SES backgrounds often have received disengaging messages, then the research was indicating that there could be, and needed to be, interruptions to the discourses of power.

### **Interruptions to the Discourses of Power**

With this framework established the FGP research became strongly distilled to further investigating how decisive pedagogical changes might turn disengaging messages into engaging messages for low SES students. This involved a consideration of how this is made possible within changes to classroom practices and interactions (discourses) on both sides of the teacher/student classroom relationship. The pedagogical changes were conceptualised to be dual key vehicles through which these messages were carried that could powerfully interrupt the discourses of power. These are:

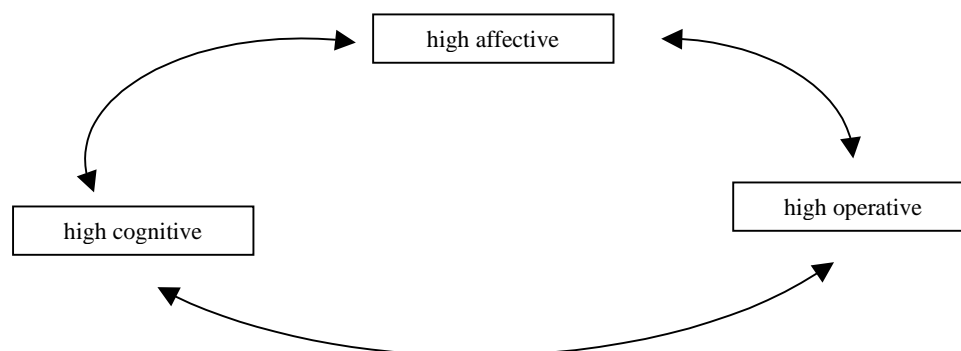
- classroom learning experiences designed to be high cognitive, high affective and high operative
- classroom processes designed to encourage enhanced reflective processes across the learning community (the "Insider Classroom – see below) .

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<sup>4</sup> Coding: K=knowledge A=ability C=control P=place V=voice

The focal point for the design of the classroom learning experiences is the balanced interplay between the high cognitive, affective and operative.

*Figure 1 – Engaging Classroom Experiences*



Within this balanced interplay, developing high cognitive activities might deploy elements from the intellectual quality dimension of productive pedagogies. The high operative component would pay careful attention to developing students as competent and empowered learners across the whole of their classroom experiences. High affective assumes that the teacher and students are involved in pedagogical conversations that highly negotiate learning situations that will bring about mutually stimulating and enjoyable emotions associated with classroom work.

Classroom processes became conceptualized within research as the “Insider Classroom”. The taking up of the term “insiders” was influenced by the different ways the project had been thinking about ‘e’ngagement and ‘E’ngagement. Definitions that had been found from the secondary theoretical framework that began to effectively capture these ideas:

... finding ways of enabling and encouraging learners to enter into communities of practice, discourse and inquiry ... to become an ‘insider’ in the culture of the classroom (Durrant & Green, 2000, p.103);

... involves becoming identified *and* identifying oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group ... playing a socially meaningful ‘role’ within that discourse community (Gee, 1990, p.143).

If learners were to be encouraged to enter into and play meaningful roles within the learning conversations and practices of the classroom community, then the FGP believed that teachers had to carefully think about what were the critical elements of classrooms that had the potential to involve and include learners. It became increasingly apparent that it was important to developing an engaging classroom philosophy. Classroom observations and some theoretical investigations<sup>5</sup> saw the proposal of the following interactive framework.

<sup>5</sup> The work of Cazden (2001) on classroom discourse and Hattie (2002) on teacher feedback were particularly helpful in this development.

*Table 2 - Key Elements of the Insider Classroom*

Student self-assessment <sup>6</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continuous opportunities for students to think about and express ideas about the processes of their learning</li> <li>Focus on cognitive, affective and operative aspects of learning and towards deeper levels of reflection</li> <li>Movement away from teacher as sole judge and towards students taking more responsibility for evaluation of learning</li> </ul>
Student community of reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A conscious environment of cooperative sharing of ideas and processes about learning</li> <li>Focus on substantive conversations encouraging student control and voice</li> <li>Movement away from compliance as a way of students responding to task completion and evaluation</li> </ul>
Teacher inclusive conversations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasis on sharing power with students rather than establishing power over students</li> <li>Visibility that encourages sharing of classroom culture – children are privy to and involved with discussions about classroom ethos and processes</li> <li>Promotion of thinking and opportunities for students to interact and share processes of learning</li> <li>Focus on learning not behaviour</li> <li>Movement away from classroom discourse that is dominated by IRE (initiation, response, evaluation) towards conversations about learning (shared, mutual, reciprocal)</li> </ul>
Teacher feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Awareness of power of written, oral and symbolic feedback on students' self- concept as learners</li> <li>Focus on staged process:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the task (talking explicitly about achievement and what students have done that is right or wrong)</li> <li>processes (helping students acquire processes and better ways of doing tasks)</li> <li>self-regulation (encouraging effort and confidence and helping students to stay on the task).</li> </ol> </li> <li>Movement away from generalized and unrelated feedback towards feedback tied to investing more effort, more attention, or more confidence into the task being undertaken</li> </ul>

The FGP student engagement framework hypothesises that when teachers consider and implement these dual critical changes to their classrooms then there are increased opportunities for bringing about heightened levels of student engagement at both 'e'ngagement and 'E'ngagement levels. As for the scaffolds developed in the Newmann and Productive Pedagogies research, the FGP framework is not intended to be prescriptive, rather a research and pedagogical heuristic enabling local dialogues to reform and reenergize learning as the most important work of schools. Table 2 summarises the engaging classroom messages that might result from these school and classroom changes.

*Table 3 – Discourses of Power and Engaging Messages for Low SES Students*

knowledge	"We can see the connection and the meaning" – reflectively constructed access to contextualised and powerful knowledge
ability	"I am capable" – feelings of being able to achieve and a spiral of high expectations and aspirations
control	"We do this together" – sharing of classroom time and space: interdependence, mutuality and power with
place	"It's great to be a kid from" – valued as individual and learner and feelings of belonging and ownership over learning
voice	"We share" – environment of discussion and reflection about learning with students and teachers playing reciprocal meaningful roles

<sup>6</sup> See Woodward and Munns (2004) for a more detailed discussion about the links between student engagement and student self-assessment.

### Didn't I Come to Bring You a Sense of Wonder

The “sense of wonder” imagery that opened this paper captures evocatively the direction and force of the pedagogical changes argued for within the FGP. Wonder has meanings as both a phenomenon and an intellectual action. That is, it can carry ideas of marvel and surprise but can also point to reflective processes. Project data is showing that students from low SES schools can become positively surprised by what can happen in their classrooms. They can also be involved in vital reflections about their learning that can draw them as insiders into classroom discourse communities. Here then is a fire of engagement, not a smouldering furnace of resistance.

To sum up and conclude, the research of the Fair Go Project is proposing is that when students are allowed to be active participants (insiders) in classrooms where the emphasis is on ‘e’ngagement (high cognitive, high affective, high operative) then classrooms are places where there are interruptions to the discourses of power. Subsequently there are real chances that they will develop a consciousness that “school is for me” (‘E’ngagement), rather than one of defeat, struggle and giving up. The miracle might yet come.

Didn't I come to bring you a sense of wonder  
Didn't I come to lift your fiery vision bright  
Didn't I come to bring you a sense of wonder in the flame  
(Van Morrison, 1984)

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